

Flannery o'connor and the use of the grotesque

Literature



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Flannery O'Connor and the Use of the Grotesque Much of Flannery O'Connor's writing revolves around themes of redemption, the concept of grace, or a character's view of the world being challenged. Often O'Connor uses extreme violence or the grotesque in her stories to provide her characters these challenges; which is interesting considering her strong religious beliefs. The stories "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and "Everything That Rises Must Converge", for example, make similar uses of literary elements to convey a similar theme.

O'Connor uses both symbolism and characterization in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" to show that all people are capable of redemptive acts, though a shocking or violent act may be needed for them to do so. O'Connor delves deeply into her characters to effectively advance the ideas in her stories. Of the characters in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" the most thoroughly developed is the Grandmother. At the story's beginning everything about her character speaks of both superficiality and selfishness. Above all what matters most to the Grandmother is her outward appearance.

For example before leaving on the road trip the Grandmother is described as dressing very neatly so that "In case of an accident anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know she was a lady" (O'Connor, "A Good Man" 374). Similarly she chides her grandchildren for not showing respect for their home state. When speaking with Red Sam she discusses how hard it has become to find a good man, revealing her idealistic views of the past. The Grandmother's entire conversation with Red Sammy is telling of her character.

Their entire conversation of what constitutes a good man provides the story's title and reveals some of the Grandmother's beliefs. Her idealistic idea of what a good man is challenged when she meets the Misfit, whom she insists is good. Whether from her attempts to save her life or what she truly thinks, the Grandmother's contention that the Misfit is good is interesting because he is, in many ways, superior to her. Similarly after the car crash she fakes an internal injury to elicit sympathy from Bailey.

Toward the end of the story is the clearest example of the Grandmother's selfishness. All the while her family, including very young grandchildren, are being marched away to be shot, her pleas for help are only for her own life. It seems as if the Christian views she espouses are at odds with her selfishness. Perhaps Kessler says it best in that, "we are left with a woman of words shown to be devious, self-satisfied and clothed in superficial matters" (61). While an accurate description of the Grandmother overall perhaps the word devious is a step too far.

The Grandmother does not represent evil; she is not a bad person she is out of touch with her beliefs. Her flaws are merely her disconnect from reality though there seems to be little real malice in the Grandmother. Indeed O'Connor agrees that "It is true that the old lady is a hypocritical old soul, her wits are no match for the Misfit's, nor is her capacity for grace equal to his" (O'Connor "Reasonable Use" 110). However, it is this self-serving nature and superficiality that make the Grandmother's final act more poignant.

The Grandmother looks at the Misfit and sees his "twisted face close to her own as if he were going to cry" and it is at this moment that she has her

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epiphany. (O'Connor " A Good Man" 388). She realizes that the Misfit, although flawed, is a member of the human race as well and, when she dies, it is " in a state of grace; her soul saved by the single moment when her faith deepened and her concern extended beyond herself" (Kilcourse 102). The Misfit's actions shock her back to reality and force her to see the Misfit as a fellow human.

Seeing this she makes a kind gesture, her act of grace and redemption before her death. The Grandmother dies smiling up at the sky as she has achieved redemption and her soul was saved by fulfilling her Christian beliefs in a meaningful, rather than superficial way. Besides the Grandmother it is the Misfit who is the most developed character. In a number of ways the Misfit is more honorable or, perhaps, pure than the Grandmother. Unlike the Grandmother he is not superficial nor does he claim to be something he is not, admitting up front that he is not a good man.

This allows the Misfit to be the perfect opposite to the Grandmother, whose beliefs are pure but actions are selfish. The Misfit is, in contrast is " aware of his spiritual inadequacy, strives to be honest, visibly struggles to know himself" (Kessler, 61). Where the Grandmother's actions are informed by her outward appearance the Misfit is more concerned with his own views of the world. There is no pretense with the Misfit. It is his brutal honesty and openness that allow him the " higher capacity for grace" (O'Connor " Reasonable Use" 110).

The way he views the world is interesting, Paulson says that he " examines life but, concludes with nihilism" (91). The Misfit seems wary of believing in anything spiritual or supernatural, stating that he would have had to see

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Jesus raise the dead to truly to know that it had happened. When he says that he cannot make his crimes fit with his punishment, perhaps the Misfit, or O'Connor's use of him, is meant to imply there is little justice in the world and that a truly good man is, indeed, hard to find. To the Misfit, it seems, only harsh reality is true.

When he says that there is "No pleasure but meanness" he is saying that crude "meanness" is the only reality in life (O'Connor "A Good Man" 387). These two characters are an interesting contrast. Where the Grandmother is grounded in her superficial beliefs the Misfit is grounded in this cruel realism. The story leaves exactly what constitutes a good man ambiguous between the Misfit's belief that he, though honest in his actions, is not a good man and the Grandmother's own limited view of a good man. To the end, it seems, the Misfit is true to what he says in claiming that he is not a good man.

Interestingly it is his violent acts towards her that allow the Grandmother to change. More than anything else in the story, the Grandmother's final act of touching the Misfit and his violence toward her are incredibly symbolic. Above all, the Grandmother's character can be described as superficial or limited. But, the Misfit's threatening of her is what she needed to change, to perform one last act of grace and perhaps even forgiveness. It is here as her life is threatened that she looks at the Misfit and "realizes, even in her limited way, she is responsible for the man before and joined to him by ties of kinship.

And at this point she makes the right gesture" (O'Connor "Reasonable Use" 113). We see here that this violent, shocking act is what finally allowed the

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Grandmother to perform an act of grace; as is common in O'Connor's writing. It is notable that the Misfit, ultimately, rejects the Grandmother's act of kindness toward him. The Misfit has shut himself off from the world, believing himself inadequate or forced to perform evil acts to even out with the punishments he has been given. The way the Misfit speaks implies that he takes not pleasure in what he does and has no desire to shoot a lady.

But, the harsh realism he has come to believe in prevents him from fulfilling his "capacity for grace" as O'Connor said. ("Reasonable Use" 110). Often O'Connor's stories use violence or grotesqueries to provide changes or realization for her characters. Some powerful act was required for the Grandmother because, according to O'Connor's beliefs, "the love of God scalds, it does not comfort" (Gordon 334).

The Grandmother's change and redemption are this story's most important aspects, "in this story you should be on the lookout for such things as the action of grace in the Grandmother's soul, and not for the dead bodies" Considering her strong religious beliefs it is interesting that O'Connor uses death, violence or grotesqueries in so many of her stories. Many interesting comparisons can be made, for example, between "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and "Everything That Rises Must Converge". Thematically these stories are very similar and O'Connor uses similar literary elements to convey her theme in both. For instance the characterization of the Grandmother and Julian's Mother in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" are very similar.

Both dress neatly at all times and both project a haughty image of themselves to the world; both view the world in a very limited way. This

description of the Grandmother could easily suit both characters, she is a “self-centered romantic, the grandmother arranges reality and indulges in fantasy when she cannot. Her false gentility precludes any honest reaction to life” (Feeley 70). With both characters there are several examples of their skewed view of the world. Both have a certain disconnect from reality, preferring to view things in their own way; skewing reality to suit their needs and to ensure their own superiority.

However their reactions to shocking events differ greatly. The Grandmother made the right gesture in her act of kindness toward the Misfit. Julian's Mother however, fails to make a similar gesture. Julian's Mother cannot face the realization that African Americans are now equal to her. Her confrontation with the black woman was “the whole colored race which will no longer take your condescending pennies. The old manners are obsolete and your graciousness is not worth a damn. You are not who you think you are” (O'Connor “Everything That Rises” 499).

Faced with this, rather than have an epiphany or act of grace, as did the Grandmother, Julian's Mother dies of a stroke. Where the Grandmother succeeded in changing, Julian's Mother had failed. At the basic level these two stories are incredibly similar: a haughty, selfish character is faced with a challenge to their superficial world view. This is a common thread in many of O'Connor's stories and she uses it effectively in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” to advance her theme. Flannery O'Connor was a devout Catholic and her beliefs informed much of her writing, which often revolves around themes of redemption or grace.

Many of her stories involve a haughty, self-satisfied character being challenged in some way. In the story "A Good Man is Hard to Find" she conveys the idea that anyone is capable of such acts of grace though a violent or shocking event may be required for them to do so. She achieves this through the use of the characterization of the Grandmother, which makes her final act more significant while the Misfit's allowed him to serve as the perfect antithesis for the Grandmother. And it was the symbolism behind the Misfit's violence that allowed the Grandmother's final redeeming act.